

Second Stockholm Forum on Himalaya Climate Crisis in Tibet

Event Report

October 16, 2025



Institute for Security & Development Policy

Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA)

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

www.isdp.eu

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Second Stockholm Forum on Himalaya: Climate Crisis in Tibet*, held on October 16, 2025, at Sjöfartshuset in Stockholm, gathered scholars, policymakers, and experts from Europe, Asia, and the Indo-Pacific to spotlight Tibet's worsening ecological and geopolitical challenges. The Forum's central message was clear: the Tibetan Plateau, the "Third Pole" that regulates monsoons, river systems, and global weather patterns, must be placed at the center of international climate diplomacy ahead of COP30 in Belém, Brazil.

Opening remarks by Dr. Jagannath Panda and Dr. Niklas Swanström framed Tibet's environmental crisis as inseparable from its geopolitical realities. They warned that unchecked glacier retreat, permafrost thaw, and militarization risk crossing irreversible tipping points. The Forum urged democratic partners to reinsert Tibet into UN climate agendas and treat it as a global ecological priority.

Panel discussions revealed how China's infrastructure expansion—such as the Mêdog Dam—embodies contradictions between green development and extractive governance. Experts detailed how resource exploitation, surveillance technologies, and hydropower projects simultaneously fuel economic growth and environmental decline. Others emphasized that these

projects also serve civil–military fusion objectives, transforming Tibet into a testing ground for strategic and technological control.

Subsequent sessions linked militarization with ideological management, describing Tibet's integration into China's national framework through cultural assimilation, data infrastructure, and economic leverage. Speakers argued that Beijing's "ideological resilience" narrative uses climate policy to justify population control and relocation.

The final panels proposed pathways forward: embedding Tibet's environmental concerns in Indo-Pacific climate strategies, enhancing transboundary water governance, and promoting open hydrological data. Participants called for renewed academic collaboration, stronger public communication, and inclusion of Tibetan voices in global sustainability debates.

The Forum concluded by reaffirming Sweden's tradition of "moral diplomacy" and ISDP's commitment to academic independence. Delegates agreed that protecting Tibet's ecological and cultural integrity is essential—not only for regional stability but for global climate security and the legitimacy of international environmental governance.



The Second Stockholm Forum on Himalaya, titled “Climate Crisis in Tibet,” was convened at the historic Stockholm city location of Sjöfartshuset on Skeppsbron 10 to deliver a clear and urgent message to the international community to recognize the mounting environmental crisis in Tibet.

As preparations intensify for COP30 in Belém, Brazil, the conference sounded a clarion call to policy makers and government officials to place Tibet at the center of global climate deliberations. Gathering distinguished scholars, policy experts, and practitioners from across Europe, Asia and the Indo-Pacific, the Forum argued that the Tibetan Plateau — often described as the “Third Pole” because it possesses the world’s greatest freshwater reserves beyond the Arctic and serves as a vital water source for much of the region—is integral to the future of global climate governance.

Opening Remarks

The conference began by sounding the alarm over the world’s continued inattention to Tibet’s deteriorating environment conditions. **Dr. Jagannath Panda**, Head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) emphasized that the climate emergency on the plateau

cannot be separated from its geopolitical setting. The plateau’s rivers sustain more than a billion people across South and Southeast Asia, he noted, warning that to discuss Himalayan stability without Tibet is to leave a critical gap in global climate diplomacy. **Dr. Panda** affirmed ISDP’s resolve to raise awareness of the issues facing Tibet, even when facing political pressure, not just bring to light the plight of Tibetans currently feeling the brunt of the deteriorating environmental conditions, but also to prevent future generations from experiencing the same fate.

Echoing these concerns, **Dr. Niklas Swanström**, Executive Director of ISDP, cautioned that Tibet’s environmental trajectory is approaching an irreversible tipping point. Glaciers are retreating at record speed, permafrost is thawing, and ecosystems long sustained by indigenous stewardship are being destabilized by militarization and large-scale infrastructure projects. Despite the urgency of these developments, Tibet remains largely absent from UN climate discourse. **Dr. Swanström** urged Europe and its partners to show the moral and intellectual resolve to treat Tibet not as a peripheral issue, but as a vital component of global ecological security.

SESSION I: China as a Revisionist Power in the Himalayas and Asia

The first session was moderated by **Dr. Eerishika Pankaj**, Director of the Organization for Research on China and Asia (ORCA), New Delhi, India. The speakers were asked to discuss China's infrastructure projects in terms of their regional and global implications, as well as their ecological impacts.

The panelists included **Mr. Charles Parton** (Former British Diplomat and Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy), **Dr. Jiayi Zhou** (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Stockholm, Sweden), **Dr. Linus Zhang** (Department of Water Resources Engineering, Lund University, Lund, Sweden), **Dr. Ute Wallenböck** (Department of Mongolian and Tibetan Studies, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany), and **Dr. Sriparna Pathak** (Jindal Global University, Sonapat, India).

Each panelist offered different insights into China's key infrastructure projects in Tibet, particularly regarding their regional and global implications. In particular, they highlighted the ecological impact of damming, mining, and highways and railway construction projects on wildlife and biodiversity. The discussion also focused on China's use of new technologies, such as AI and satellite monitoring, which are instrumentalized to

implement China's policies in Tibet and to surveil the local population.

Geotechnical and Geopolitical Risks of the Mêdog Dam and other Projects in Tibet

Mr. Charles Parton started the discussion by talking about the Mêdog dam, an enormous hydroelectric project in southeastern Tibet that China plans to build on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo River, near the Indian border. He stated that, "power is water in electric form" and, as was mentioned in the introduction to the conference, "Tibet is China's water supply". Drawing on research conducted over more than a decade, Mr. Parton drew on expert engineering sources to highlight the severe geotechnical, environmental, and seismic risks associated with the Mêdog Dam, arguing that its construction in such a fragile and tectonically active region poses significant dangers not only to local communities but also to downstream ecosystems and transboundary water security.

First, he mentioned the fact that this region is susceptible to earthquakes, using the example of the 1950 Assam-Tibet earthquake, which had a magnitude of 8.7 on the Richter scale, and caused approximately 4,800 fatalities. He briefly mentioned other examples of more recent earthquakes, pinpointing the high probability and consequences of earthquakes in the region. He argued



that the water reservoir behind the Mêdog Dam would also increase the risks of earthquakes. Second, earthquakes also increase the risk of landslides and mudslides into the regional rivers, which have already happened on multiple occasions. He then mentioned the risk of erosion and water evaporation, which in turn increases the effects of earthquakes due to the weakening of the soil and natural environment.

In addition to the chance of vegetation being soaked by the reservoir, there are also impacts on fish. He finished his presentation by mentioning India-China relations, highlighting that India lacks proper statistics regarding water, and a growing risk for Indian's and Bangladeshis' provision of fish. This represents a great

concern as both countries heavily rely on fish in their food consumption. He then mentioned the risk of there being less water for India in dry seasons. In his last remarks, he stated that he feared Tibet would become in the future a data center for China, as more infrastructure and more data centers are built in all of Tibet.

Examining the Contradictions of China's "Green" Development in Tibet

Dr. Jiayi Zhou focused her presentation on highlighting the various contradictions around China's infrastructure projects in Tibet. As such, she started by underscoring that China is one of the largest carbon gas emitters in the world, but also one of the most vocal advocates for the green energy transition. Then she mentioned the extent of China's extraction of minerals,

which are crucial for the green energy transition, despite being the “most polluted industries”. She highlighted the international contradiction of powers criticizing China for its extraction projects while simultaneously maintaining significant extraction projects around the world. Then, she highlighted the fact that China has been developing hydropower dam projects for decades and is likely to continue to pursue these projects despite the evidence of population displacements and various environmental risks.

In their very nature, hydro dams are also contradictory, as they appear clean in principle but have a high human and environmental costs, as was mentioned and emphasized throughout the forum. She also highlighted criticism to the international community, as actors themselves criticize China’s infrastructure projects as being unsustainable, they must also address their high levels of greenhouse gas emissions and environmentally damaging infrastructure projects. She went on to state that, “it’s a more holistic problem than just China versus the rest of the world.” As an example, she mentioned that the World Bank is investing more in hydropower dams, despite their own contradictions and high environmental and cultural impacts.

A Scientific Perspective on Water, Climate, and Infrastructure in Tibet
Dr. Linus Zhang, as the only hydrologist at

the Forum, brought to the discussion a more scientific perspective. Dr. Zhang presented data analysis exposed various underlying issues related to water availability, water quality, conflicts between users, water treatment, and water management and governance in the Tibetan region. In his presentation, Dr. Zhang focused on climate change, demonstrating its global impacts and various scenarios depending on different increases in global temperature. Then he focused on the distribution of water throughout the globe, stating that some regions can and will have too much or too little water. He underlined that this problem is a global one, comparing climate related water issues in Sweden to those in Tibet and highlighting the importance of water distribution for food supply, and the need for humanity to keep the water cycle balanced. Dr. Zhang also exposed the enormous water footprint embedded in everyday products, noting that, for example, one kilo of coffee uses about 20,000 liters of water. He then went on to illustrate that water sustainability is vital to each of the 17 UN sustainable development goals, emphasizing that “none are waterless”.

With this context in mind, he shifted his presentation towards the climate impact of China’s infrastructure projects by stating that, “China has a traditional love for large water projects”, illustrating this with the examples of the Dujiangyan 2250 years ago; the Three Gorges projects in the 1990’s; the

South to North Water Transfer project in the 2000s; the Yarlung Zangbo hydropower project on 2025; and a new, and for now unofficial, project called the Red Flag river was in discussion. Following this, echoing Mr. Parton, he exposed various reasons against the construction of hydropower dams, highlighting the ecological risks. He finished his presentation by giving possible solutions to this global issue, like for example furthering water diplomacy and increasing “hydro-solidarity”.

Visualizing Modernization and Control in Tibet

Dr. Ute Wallenböck shared insights from her travel in Tibet, drawing on her firsthand experiences and photographs taken during her travels to illustrate her discoveries and observations. Using photographic evidence, she demonstrated the scale and reality of China’s infrastructure, such as the newly constructed highways and mines. Those pictures were particularly revealing as they underscored China’s modernization projects and their various impacts, showing not only China’s growing control of Tibet population with large numbers of cameras and the use of AI for surveillance, but also through its sprawling urban infrastructure projects used to resettle villages and nomads.

Dr. Wallenböck then explored China’s control over Tibet’s natural environment, resources, and landscape, which are significantly impacted by industrial

activities, such as mining and cement production. For instance, the Shigatse Yaqu New Building Materials Company operates the highest altitude cement production line, located at an elevation of 4,251.951 meters. Additionally, the construction of highways often runs through national parks, as seen in the Zhada Earth Forest National Geopark, and near many religious sites. This development has further affected the local population and their traditions.

In her presentation, she made the observation that the roads were of better quality than those in Germany, and that they are nourished by renewable energy, such as windmills, solar panels, and hydropower dams. She even added that there is Wi-Fi everywhere, thus highlighting even more the level of modernization and transformation of Tibet. Her photos also showed the scale of China’s presence in Tibet, in terms of signs of propaganda, which were located everywhere, as she stated, “my head is full of propaganda (...) you see it 24/7”. For example, a sign stating, “without China’s Communist Party, there would be no socialist new Tibet”. In the discussion that concluded the panel, Dr. Wallenböck highlighted the need for and importance of reaching out to younger generations to shed light on Tibet’s crisis, as well as the need to “stop our self-censorship”.



Weaponizing the Climate: Geopolitical and Human Implications of China's Projects in Tibet

Dr. Sriparna Pathak centered around increasing international recognition that the climate crisis in Tibet is one that neighboring countries and the international community cannot ignore, stating that “there is a weaponization of the climate in Tibet” and added that it was “a tool to which China’s aggression against India continues increasing”. She argued that China’s “aggressive pursuit” transformed the “Tibetan plateau into a frontline for resource extraction”, at the expense of the Tibetan population. As an example, she pointed out that Chinese industrial policies have affected plant and soil quality, undermining the livelihoods of many nomadic communities in Tibet.

She then shifted focus towards the cultural and social impacts of China’s projects. As examples, she highlighted human rights abuses and the fact that Tibetans rarely protest out of fear of retaliation. In addition to the tighter control of the population, especially in line with China’s civil-military fusion strategy, which increases its physical as well as virtual presence in Tibet.

Dr. Pathak also pointed out the erasure of Tibetan culture, especially with the increased migration of the Han population in Tibet, as well as the use of imprisonment and repression to subjugate any dissent from the party line. She also emphasized that “economic benefits largely bypass Tibetans, it perpetuates a colonial style dynamic”, despite China’s narrative of

poverty alleviation with China's projects. She then turned to the environmental impacts, pointing out similar facts as previous speakers, particularly regarding the growing climate risks with the construction and multiplication of infrastructure in the region, especially with the hydropower and mining projects. She ended her presentation by raising concerns over the impact of this crisis on downstream countries, arguing that China's project will continue to "spark geopolitical tensions" through its growing border militarization and weaponization of water resources. Downstream countries are increasingly in danger of floods and droughts as China gains more control over the rivers and water resources upstream. She highlighted that this situation would continue to generate tensions, taking note of India's countermeasures, such as the lodging of formal protests to Beijing, increasing militarization at the border with the construction of strategic infrastructure, and New Delhi's push to get China to be more transparent with its hydrological data.

Finally, she called for renewed diplomatic efforts and urgent international oversight on environmental and human rights issues, alongside measures to mitigate biodiversity loss and prevent conflict. During the open discussion that followed the first session, she also underscored the absence of regional coordination among Southeast Asian countries, particularly

concerning water distribution and climate risks. She attributed this lack of cooperation to the fact that most Southeast Asian states remain "deeply under China's influence" and are therefore reluctant to risk heightening tensions with Beijing.

SESSION II: Militarization and Infrastructure Build Up in Tibet: Climate and Ecological Fallout

This session focused on the military modernization efforts in the Tibetan Plateau, especially touching on the financial resources being allocated in these projects, the current and projected strategies of the CCP for consolidating control over Tibet through the PLA, as well as the dual use of China's infrastructure, and finally developing on the long-term environmental effects these projects will have on Tibet.

The session was moderated by **Mr. Björn Jerdén**, from the Swedish National China Centre (NKK). This session consisted of **Dr. Niklas Swanström** (Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden), **Mr. Richard Ghiasy** (Leiden Asia Center, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands and Director of GeoStrat), **Dr. Dattesh Parulekar** (Goa University, Goa, India), and **Ms. Eerishika Pankaj** (Organization for Research on China and Asia, New Delhi, India).



The Limits of Negotiation and the Strategic Implications of PLA Expansion in Tibet

Dr. Niklas Swanström opened the session by stating that negotiating with China was impossible. He added that what might function with the CCP is cooperation, because their primary goal is their own interests and what is “relevant” for them; cooperation might give them something that they would not obtain in a negotiation. Dr. Swanström focused on the security side and aspects of China’s projects. He highlighted that the PLA was very proud of their infrastructure and pointed out the scale of military expansion, stating that at least “three hundred new military installations have been constructed since the 1950s” and that “we should be clear that the PLA’s command covers 2.6 million square meters” in Tibet. This military

expansion is strategic and crucial to China due to its proximity to India.

He then shifted towards the economic impacts of China’s military infrastructure and listed, as other speakers in the first session did, the various consequences of such constructions. Like Dr. Pathak, he highlighted the weaponization of water against opposition and downstream countries. He also underlined the lack of military statistics regarding environmental impacts and stated, “the problem is that there’s very little international insight and overview of the Tibetan region,” despite gathering data with satellites, which he described as insufficient. Therefore, “we lack an understanding of the impact,” and he added that this issue is a “climate emergency” that is not solely confined to the Tibetan region.

China's Goals in Tibet

Mr. Richard Ghiasy started his presentation by outlining China's goals in Tibet. First, he stated that "Tibet is an energy hub," powering China in the fourth industrial revolution with an AI economy and general competitiveness, in addition to the development of green and renewable energy such as solar, water, and wind. Second, he argued that part of China's militarization goals relates to pre-empting any Indian insurgency at its border. Third, he argued that China is attempting to increase its control and power over South Asia. And fourth, much of this policy is aimed at limiting domestic dissent and social unrest, thereby "reinforcing greater sovereignty over Tibet."

As previous speakers pointed out, Mr. Ghiasy highlighted the importance of China's civil-military strategy, especially with its border infrastructure, and stated that the scale and amount of Military-Strategic Facilities (MSF) construction are "unmatched" and represented a "total integration of military, civilian, cyber, and development all in one." He added that MSF construction can be considered a "grey zone campaign," as it increases the PLA's control over the population and the ground without using officially conflict-related language.

Mr. Ghiasy pointed out the increased readiness of China's military and described a "tremendous amount of upscaling

and development" in their projects and construction. He then shifted towards the climate consequences of this infrastructure and stated that China is moving toward a possible "hydro-hegemony" and could, theoretically, allow it to weaponize water. He added that Tibet has "tremendous potential" in terms of solar and wind energy production.

He transitioned to AI by noting that China is increasing the number of servers and using AI to enhance access to water. He concluded his presentation by asserting that the scale of "what China produces and consumes for itself and the rest of China," in addition to what is consumed by the rest of the world, especially the US and Western countries, "has even more impact on Tibet and the melting glaciers than the activities of the PLA."

China's Ideological Resilience and the Militarization of Tibet

Dr. Dattesh Parulekar opened his presentation by referencing China's White Papers and noting that China pinpointed social fragmentation and ideological drift as key issues to be addressed by its militarization policies. He argued that this forms part of China's strategy to justify its actions and projects in Tibet. He then claimed that, from China's perspective, Tibet is safeguarded, and that "what is required is the hardening of Tibet." Therefore, he highlighted that China's perspective has shifted from a

defensive position to a strategy of “how do you integrate Tibet within the national framework?”, which he later termed “ideological resilience.”

China uses the climate issue to promote a sense of shared national identity, framing environmental protection as a collective duty. This narrative is then employed to justify the relocation and tighter control of Tibetan communities under the guise of ecological preservation. Dr. Parulekar added that Beijing now views Tibet as a “profit center,” a region where it invests heavily and seeks to generate economic returns through industrial and infrastructural development. He further described Tibet as “part of diversified and distributed leverage,” meaning that China treats the region as both an economic and strategic asset—one that enhances its influence not only within Tibet but also across its surrounding border areas.

Like previous speakers, Dr. Parulekar emphasized that “China is weaponizing the specialty of militarisation,” meaning that its militarisation operates across four domains: outer space, digital, ground, and subsoil. He underscored that this militarisation is not only physical but also virtual, particularly through the increased deployment of cameras and the use of AI for monitoring the population.

He then discussed four key complexes at work in Tibet that illustrate China’s

strategy of military modernisation: logistical, industrial, resource-based, and the weaponisation of the border, which he divided into two aspects. The first involves the exclusion of India from international and regional forums, such as the Forums for the Himalaya established by China. The second concerns Tibet’s transformation into a bridge between China and the rest of Asia, particularly with Bhutan and Nepal.

He concluded his presentation by stating that China is portraying Tibet as “fundamental to China’s new rise.” This, he explained, involves three key elements: first, the reconstruction of Tibetan identity; second, the integration of Tibet within China’s wider economic and strategic ecosystem; and third, “using Tibet no longer as a defensive posture but as an anchor for power projection in the Himalayas and parts of South-East Asia.”

Militarization and Ideological Control of Tibet

Ms. Eerishika Pankaj began her presentation by discussing Xi Jinping’s visit to Tibet, noting that despite his age and the region’s high altitude, he still made the trip—underscoring Tibet’s importance to China. She posed the question, “Why now?” and argued that the visit was linked to succession politics surrounding the Dalai Lama. She explained that this aligns with China’s goal of bringing the monasteries’ power and influence under state control and ensuring that “the teaching of Tibetan

Buddhism is not something that is carried forward.” She described this process as “ideological crushing.”

Ms. Pankaj then shifted her focus to the militarization of Tibet, highlighting India’s perspective on the restructuring of the Tibetan Plateau. She argued that China is instrumentalizing Tibet to test its military strategies, stating that “Tibet has been classified as a defensive buffer” and as a “projection hub for the Western Theater Command.” She added that Tibet has become a site of “high-level investment” aimed at expanding dual-use infrastructure in line with China’s civil-military fusion strategy, which poses a major strategic concern for India, as such infrastructure enables “massive troop deployment.”

Later in her presentation, she warned that if these military projects continue, Tibet will become a “fully securitized corridor.” She then turned to the ecological impact of this infrastructure, noting that China’s White Papers largely ignore these issues. This omission, she argued, reveals that Chinese authorities do not account for the ecological or cultural consequences of their projects. Echoing previous speakers, she concluded that Tibet’s climate crisis is “not a localized issue” and outlined the most urgent environmental consequences resulting from China’s ongoing developments in the region.

SESSION III

Population Politics: Erasure of Tibetan Culture and Identity

Moderated by **Ambassador Lars Vargö**, Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), the third session explored how China’s demographic, cultural and administrative policies in Tibet constitute a deliberate program of assimilation and control. Panelists included **Dr. Tsering Topgyal** (University of Birmingham), **Dr. Astha Chadha** (Ritsumeikan University), **Mr. Rahul Karan Reddy** (Organization for Research on China and Asia) and **Ms. Shruti Kapil** (International Centre for Sustainability, London).

Tibet as a Colonial Project

Opening the session, **Dr. Tsering Topgyal** underscored the persistent absence of Tibetans and other Himalayan communities in global debates about the Himalayan region. Drawing from his experiences as one of the few Tibetan academics regularly invited to policy discussions, he argued that the nature of Chinese rule in Tibet is inherently colonial. This, he explained, stems from Beijing’s deep-seated ontological anxieties over national unity and fear that ethnic consciousness might destabilize the state, as happened with the Soviet Union.

Dr. Topgyal traced the coercive origins of Chinese control over Tibet, rejecting any notion that it was a voluntary association.

He described the current governance system as autocratic and extractive, with real power concentrated in the hands of Han Chinese Party secretaries and cadres. Tibetans, though visible in local administrations, play subordinate roles — often as instruments of the state’s control. They are recruited into the PLA, police and militias, sometimes even deployed in frontier resettlement programs to reinforce China’s territorial claims. Tibetan Lamas were also being used in China’s soft-power and Buddhist diplomacy.

He noted that Tibet’s strategic and military significance is routinely invoked to justify repression. “If Taiwan is an unsinkable aircraft carrier,” he recalled a Cold War era American general, more specifically, General Douglas MacArthur during the

Korean War, as saying, “then Tibet is a flying mothership.” He elaborated that the plateau’s altitude makes it ideal for surveillance and missile deployment, which explains China’s militarization policies in the region.

Dr. Topgyal also detailed the party-state’s cultural imperialism, including the imposition of Mandarin as the medium of education and of religious discourse, as well as the co-option of Tibetan cultural elements under the umbrella of “Chinese culture.” Even the term “Tibet” is being erased from official discourse in favor of the Mandarin term “Xizang” (西藏). He argued that these measures represent not merely assimilation, but an effort to remake Tibetan identity in China’s image.



Tibetan Advocacy in Japan

Dr. Astha Chadha expanded on Tibet's external advocacy networks, particularly in Japan, where a small but active Tibetan diaspora has developed a twofold advocacy approach: cultural preservation away from home and non-violent international advocacy. She observed that the loss of Tibetan language and the prevalence of Mandarin-first boarding schools are seen by exiled Tibetans as tools of cultural erasure, prompting renewed efforts among the diaspora to maintain intergenerational continuity through family-based teaching and community gatherings.

Dr. Chadha highlighted the June 2025 Tokyo declaration, which condemned the sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism and the destruction of Tibet's cultural foundations. The declaration, endorsed by Japanese Diet members, reaffirmed support for the Middle Way Approach — an approach proposed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to peacefully resolve the issue of Tibet and focused on co-existence between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples based on equality and mutual co-operation — and the protection of Tibet's fragile ecosystem. She noted that the Dalai Lama's messages for the Tibetan diaspora are screened in Japan's Tokyo Festival and continue to inspire solidarity throughout the Tibetan diaspora.

Japan, she argued, treads carefully when criticizing China on Tibetan issues due to

its own colonial legacy and the constraints of its One-China policy. Yet, the island nation has also allowed limited advocacy within civil society. For example, Buddhist organizations in Japan have also fostered solidarity by organizing online prayer gatherings and events with the Tibetan diaspora. Many older members in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) also have a close relationship with Tibetan diaspora organizations; however with the LDP losing political ground in the recent elections and electing new leadership for the Japan Parliamentary Support Group for Tibet, such connection may be weakened unless there is active support from within the government for Tibet issues.

Dr. Chadha added that the discussion on Tibet is relatively limited in Japanese academia owing to Tokyo's foreign policy and presence of Chinese diaspora and students. Certain sensitive discussions around Tibet and Taiwan are dealt with carefully or avoided in classrooms. Nevertheless, she suggested that framing Tibet's struggle in cultural and environmental terms rather than as a sovereignty issue could resonate with Japan's strong environmental ethic and avoid many of the political sensitivities around the Tibet issue.

Sinicization as Statecraft

Mr. Rahul Karan Reddy examined China's ongoing sinicization campaign as articulated in Xi Jinping's 22nd

Collective Study Session of the Politburo in September 2025, which called for “actively guiding religions to adapt to socialist society.” He identified two core policy aims underpinning this strategy: national integration and ethnic unity, pursued through demographic, urban, and ideological transformation.

Citing province and prefecture level data, Mr. Reddy noted that between China’s sixth and seventh censuses, Tibet’s Han population increased by roughly 80–90 per cent, far outpacing growth in other provinces. Prefectural-level data from Lhasa, Shigatse, and Ngari reveal similar trends, compounded by a massive influx of non-Tibetan cadres through programs such as “Aid Tibet,” which have placed thousands of officials in the region for multi-year terms.

Mr. Reddy noted that population redistribution lies at the core of Beijing’s efforts to consolidate control. Urbanization has been aggressively promoted through *hukou* (household registration) reforms and large-scale relocation schemes. To achieve urbanization targets, Tibetans are being moved from traditional rural and nomadic areas into new prefecture-level cities and county towns, where social monitoring and ideological indoctrination are more easily enforced. The provincial government’s 2024 work report cited the relocation of over hundreds of thousands of people ostensibly for “employment

opportunities,” but in practice, these programs dismantle pastoral livelihoods and disrupt community cohesion. As urban centers expand, the pattern of Han in-migration accelerates, setting off a self-reinforcing cycle of demographic transformation that erodes Tibet’s cultural and geographic distinctiveness.

Environmental impacts of migration and urbanization are compounded by the broader emphasis on development. Development is presented in planning documents as a necessity for economic growth and improvement of Tibetans’ living standards in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Through a variety of policy interventions, like construction of large-scale transportation networks and resource extraction efforts, the government has accelerated an environmentally unsettling dynamic of development.

Infrastructure Expansion: Development or Control?

Infrastructure projects, often justified in the language of “poverty alleviation” or “development,” serve both economic and political functions. Echoing some **Mr. Parton’s** analysis in Session I, **Mr. Reddy** argued that while the Medog (Motuo) Dam has been framed in local planning documents as a solution to energy shortages among herders and farmers, in reality it represents a massive resource-extraction initiative, requiring the importation of thousands of Han workers,

engineers, and officials. Such projects are strategically located along sensitive border regions, thereby reinforcing both territorial control and population resettlement.

These infrastructural undertakings are also intertwined with Beijing's broader regional strategy. Highways, rail links, and hydroelectric facilities not only integrate Tibet into national supply chains but also enable dual-use military logistics, allowing for rapid troop deployment and surveillance. The rhetoric of "development" thus conceals a broader militarized governance model, where economic and strategic concerns converge to consolidate Chinese authority.

Cultural Control and Ideological Re-engineering

Complementing these physical transformations are pervasive efforts at cultural and ideological remolding. The Party's directive to advance the "sinicization of religion," which mandates that all faiths, including Tibetan Buddhism, must "adapt to socialist society." Under this framework, Tibetan monasteries are required to display national symbols, teach political education, and promote "patriotic clergy." Tibetan-language education is being systematically replaced by Mandarin-only instruction, especially in boarding schools for rural children, where contact with family and local traditions is limited.

Tibetan customs, place names, and religious vocabulary are being replaced, altered, or co-opted. As **Dr. Chadha** and **Dr. Topgyal** both observed, Buddhist scriptures are being translated into Chinese, forcing future generations of monks and nuns to engage in religious discourse through the state's linguistic and ideological lens. Meanwhile, Tibetan cultural heritage, such as traditional opera, medicine, and folk epics, is rebranded as part of "Chinese civilisation," stripping these traditions of their autonomous identity. This campaign extends to reportedly pressuring international institutions and museums to use the Chinese term Xizang in place of "Tibet."

Environmental and Strategic Concerns in Tibet: A UK Perspective

Ms. Shruti Kapil contextualized Tibet's transformation within the global climate-security nexus. Drawing parallels to China's Three Gorges Dam, she warned that mega-projects such as Medog could displace vast populations and erase invaluable cultural heritage. Speaking from a UK strategic perspective, she emphasized that Tibet's ecological fragility and water resources make it central to Indo-Pacific stability.

She emphasized that Tibet deserves recognition as the "Third Pole" freshwater reserves beyond the Arctic and role as a vital water source for much of the region. Reflecting these facts, Tibet

must be recognized as a global climate priority, noting that unregulated Chinese hydropower development threatens downstream countries in South and Southeast Asia. Ms. Kapil urged like-minded democracies in Europe and elsewhere to integrate Tibetan environmental security into climate diplomacy and the Indo-Pacific policy agenda.

Dialogue and Reflections

In the ensuing discussion, **Ambassador Vargö** invited the panel to reflect on whether China's policies might ultimately undermine their own objectives.

Mr. Reddy observed that Beijing's purging of Tibetan officials under the guise of anti-corruption campaigns weakens the appearance of ethnic inclusion, while **Dr. Chadha** argued that Beijing underestimates the resilience of intergenerational memory and everyday practices among Tibetans and the diaspora—forms of subtle resistance that remain outside state control. **Dr. Topgyal** added that while China has succeeded in consolidating political control, it has failed to erode Tibetan national consciousness and aspirations for greater rights; each attempt at sinicization, he said, reinforces a sense of distinct Tibetan identity.

The discussion turned to the question of succession after the Dalai Lama's passing, which panelists agreed would mark a

critical juncture in the future of Tibet. **Dr. Topgyal** predicted that there will inevitably be competing Dalai Lamas—one appointed by Beijing and another recognized by the Dalai Lama's estate in India. Technically speaking from a Buddhist point of view, the Chinese Dalai Lama cannot be regarded as a genuine 'reincarnation'. He warned that India's response to the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama will be pivotal, as will the stance of neighboring Nepal and major powers like the United States, which has explicitly rejected China's authority over the reincarnation process.

Dr. Chadha noted that Japanese observers have speculated on the possibility of a non-traditional reincarnation outside traditional places of previous reincarnations in Asia, highlighting the increasingly political nature of the process. **Mr. Reddy** concluded that India's policy toward the next Dalai Lama is quietly evolving, evidenced by the participation of senior ministers at recent events with the Tibetan spiritual leader.

In response to questions from the other participants, the panel also discussed Japan's potential to advance Tibet-related climate awareness and the UK's role in promoting transboundary water governance frameworks. **Dr. Chadha** emphasized that while Japan's public exhibits strong environmental consciousness, Tibet remains largely absent from mainstream discourse. **Ms.**

Kapil suggested that renewed UK–EU collaboration on hydrological data sharing and sustainability could strengthen international engagement where it is currently lacking.

Overall, the session highlighted that China’s policies in Tibet represent a comprehensive strategy of demographic, cultural, and environmental control aimed at consolidating authority and reshaping Tibetan identity. The discussion concluded that protecting Tibet’s cultural and ecological integrity is vital not only for Tibetans but for regional stability and international climate security.

SESSION IV:

Panel Discussion – Bringing Tibet to the Fore of Global Debate

The fourth session concluded the forum with a panel centered around the concept of Tibet as the “Third Pole” and explored the environmental, political, and strategic challenges facing the Tibetan Plateau and assessed practical pathways for constructive engagement among democratic nations, China, and regional stakeholders. Concluded by **Dr. Niklas Swanström** and **Dr. Jagannath Panda**, the session represented one of the most comprehensive discussions to date on connecting Tibet’s environmental crisis with global sustainability, regional diplomacy, and academic independence.

The final session, moderated by **Dr. Panda**, began with his opening remarks. He thanked the speakers for their presentations and summarized earlier discussions focused on identifying problems and advancing shared goals. He emphasized the forum’s purpose — raising Tibet and Himalayan environmental issues at international, continental, and regional levels (UNFCCC / COP30, Europe, Asia) and encouraging cooperation between governments, NGOs, and think tanks.

He invited participants to elaborate on possible solutions and to identify “a common thread” linking Tibet and Himalayan climate concerns. Dr. Panda noted that multiple levels of engagement were needed: while the project aimed to highlight Tibet at global forums such as COP30, discussions must also take place within European and Asian platforms to avoid excessive politicization. He urged collaboration among think tanks, NGOs, and practitioners to advance these efforts, emphasizing that Tibet’s environmental challenges extended beyond the local community to affect the entire Himalayan and international ecosystem.

Tibet as the “Third Pole” and the Call for Scholarly Engagement

Dr. Pankaj opened by emphasizing that Tibet was the “third pole,” possessing vast water reserves that influenced global systems such as the South Asian monsoons and Arctic patterns. She stressed that

Tibet's climate crisis was not a local matter but a global one.

She urged continued dialogue and intelligence-sharing beyond the conference, particularly between India and Europe, and reflected on the need for personal commitment — urging individual scholars to remain engaged in Tibet-related work beyond institutional settings. She also criticized academic self-censorship, particularly in India, where visa and political pressures discouraged open discussion, and encouraged collaboration with Tibetan scholars to sustain active research networks.

Mobilizing the Global South and Leveraging the Commonwealth for Tibet Advocacy

Mr. Parton raised the question of whether liberal democracies could mobilize the Global South more effectively on climate and Tibet issues, suggesting that the United Kingdom could play a leading role. He proposed leveraging the Commonwealth as a platform for non-confrontational but strategic engagement with China and called for more scholarly work to strengthen the Tibet discourse. He also recommended mediums such as podcasts to feature Tibet-climate experts and reach younger audiences who preferred audio-based content for complex topics.

Water Diplomacy and Agro-Solidarity as Pathways to Sustainability

Dr. Zhang highlighted two key concepts — Water Diplomacy and Agro-Solidarity — as potential solutions to Tibet's environmental challenges. He suggested organizing a thematic session at Stockholm Water Week, a platform well-known in China, to deepen scientific and policy discussions on sustainability. He argued that such dialogue could help Chinese policymakers better understand the long-term impacts of unsustainable development in Tibet.

Expanding Public Awareness and Combating Academic Self-Censorship

Dr. Wallenböck appreciated the panel's multidisciplinary perspectives and observed that most students remained unaware of Tibet's significance. She advocated for greater public engagement through podcasts, media, and social platforms to reach audiences beyond academia. She encouraged bringing more Chinese scholars into these discussions and warned against self-censorship, emphasizing that the Tibetan climate crisis was inseparable from questions of human rights and cultural preservation.

UN Accountability, Sanctions, and Civil Society Coalitions for Water Security

Dr. Pathak proposed that the United Nations increase scrutiny of Tibet's climate issues and include Tibetan voices in international forums. She suggested targeted sanctions

on Chinese firms involved in mining and dam construction in Tibet, citing examples such as H&M's response to Xinjiang. She also recommended forming civil society coalitions for regional water security across South and Southeast Asia, referencing the work of DoubleThink Lab (Taiwan) and RightsCon. She concluded by reminding participants that "every drop in the ocean counts."

The Power of Media and Moral Framing in Raising Global Awareness

Mr. Ghiasy discussed the influence of mainstream Western media, which could spotlight issues like Tibet or Xinjiang when it chose to do so. He argued that ethical and emotional framing — for example, presenting Tibet as the "third pole" was essential to mobilize international concern. He cited Greta Thunberg as an example of how moral narratives could drive global engagement.

Building Regional Coalitions and Countering China's Global Standards Strategy

Dr. Parulekar referred to Xi Jinping's 2035 goal for setting global technical standards and warned of China's increasing control over global commons frameworks. He advocated building regional coalitions among India, Nepal, and Bhutan to advance water and climate diplomacy, urging India to use its positions in CORD and the G7+ to raise Tibet's environmental issues globally. He also proposed coordinated

think tank and NGO summits to hold China accountable for its sustainability claims.

Reclaiming Cultural Identity and Representation in the Climate Discourse

Dr. Topgyal expressed gratitude for the inclusion of a Tibetan scholar in the conference and highlighted Tibet's critical global and regional climate role. He emphasized that environmental change in Tibet could not be separated from human rights and cultural identity. He warned against "de-Tibetanizing" the climate discourse by replacing the word "Tibet" with "Himalayas," arguing that such reframing erased cultural ownership. He advocated for the inclusion of affected communities — Tibetans, Bhutanese, Ladakhis — in both advocacy and research. Dr. Topgyal also referenced a Chinese artist's fireworks display in Tibet that provoked widespread outrage, illustrating cultural insensitivity and ecological harm. He emphasized the importance of using Chinese social media to reach sympathetic Han audiences and to build bridges based on shared ecological awareness.

Integrating Tibet into Academic Curricula and Creating Safe Research Networks

Dr. Chadha expressed gratitude and described the session as deeply educational. She planned to integrate Tibet-related topics into her teaching and research in Japan, noting that Tibet was largely absent

from mainstream academic or policy discourse, even compared to Taiwan or North Korea. She questioned why the topic remained off the radar and proposed forming safe online research collectives to sustain discussion. She emphasized the importance of paper-based reports and tangible academic outputs to influence policymakers.

Reviving Hydro-Diplomacy and Promoting Sustainable Development Models

Mr. Reddy built on earlier points about hydro-diplomacy and data sharing, calling for the revival of water-sharing and climate-data agreements with China. He suggested involving the EU and research institutes in studying glacial and hydrological events, citing a Nepal–China glacial flood that destroyed a border bridge as an example

of urgent need. He advocated reframing China’s development model in Tibet toward smaller, more sustainable projects aligned with its own ecological civilization rhetoric.

Toward Indo-Pacific Climate and Water Governance

Ms. Kapil offered three policy recommendations: integrate Himalayan and Tibetan issues into Indo-Pacific strategies as a climate and security pillar; champion trans-boundary water governance through the G7 and Commonwealth; and invest in climate resilience and green financing for the Himalayan ecosystem. She concluded by calling for open hydrological data and transparent governance to engage China constructively.



Sweden's Moral Diplomacy and Symbolic Resistance on Tibet

Ambassador Vargö reflected on Sweden's "moral foreign policy" tradition and compared Chinese policy in Tibet to Japan's colonial suppression of the Korean language, emphasizing that cultural identity survived despite repression. He encouraged Sweden to persist in highlighting universal rights, describing it as being "a pebble in the shoe" — a small but principled presence. He recalled Sweden's support for the Dalai Lama's Nobel Peace Prize and urged continued symbolic resistance.

Follow-Up Discussion

Participants raised key questions regarding:

- Ensuring credible environmental data on Tibet.
- Training early-career researchers to communicate clearly and ethically.
- Learning from other advocacy models, such as the Free Palestine movement.
- Investigating China's infrastructure, renewable, and surveillance projects in the Himalayas.
- Using data-driven exposure similar to Adrian Zenz's Xinjiang research as a model for Tibet.

Panelists emphasized the importance of clarity, brevity, and strategy, noting that policymakers responded better to concise,

visual, and solution-oriented materials. They urged framing Tibet within China's own sustainability narrative, holding Beijing to the standards it publicly claimed to uphold, and training scholars to adapt their research for accessible communication.

Dr. Swanström reflected on the dilemmas of engaging China. He discussed the choice between engaging with the Chinese government or civil society, observing that China had shown interest in transforming military cooperation exchanges into climate exercises, though he questioned whether democracies should pursue that path. He noted Sweden's cautious approach toward China, largely due to its proximity to Russia, and compared China's infrastructural ambitions in Tibet to Nordic projects in the Arctic, framing both as potential yet problematic avenues for cooperation. He concluded that the effectiveness of academic research and moral consistency, and encouraged participants to "hold their ground" against external pressure, remarking, "Whenever you think something's important, don't back down." He ended by thanking participants for their contributions and insights. Dr. Panda closed the session by expressing gratitude to Dr. Swanström and ISDP for their institutional support.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Tibet as a Global Climate Nexus:**
The Tibetan Plateau, known as the “Third Pole,” holds the world’s largest freshwater reserves outside the Arctic and Antarctica, influencing monsoons, river systems, and climate patterns across Asia.
- **Environmental Emergency:**
Rapid glacier retreat, permafrost thaw, and unchecked infrastructure development have pushed Tibet toward an ecological tipping point with regional and global consequences.
- **Militarization and Environmental Degradation:**
China’s large-scale military and infrastructure projects—including hydropower dams, data centers, and dual-use transport networks—are accelerating environmental damage while consolidating state control.
- **Civil–Military Fusion and “Ideological Resilience”:**
China’s policies in Tibet fuse military strategy, economic development, and ideological governance, using climate and modernization narratives to justify surveillance, population relocation, and assimilation.
- **Weaponization of Water:**
The construction of massive dams, such as the Mêdog Dam, poses significant seismic, ecological, and geopolitical risks for downstream nations, including India, Bangladesh, and Southeast Asian states.
- **Cultural and Demographic Transformation:**
Sinicization policies—Mandarin-language education, relocation programs, and the erasure of Tibetan identity—were described as forms of cultural and demographic control amounting to internal colonization.
- **Geopolitical Implications:**
Tibet’s transformation into a militarized “buffer zone” enhances China’s regional power projection capabilities, particularly vis-à-vis India and the broader Indo-Pacific.

- **Call for International Action:**
Participants urged democratic nations to reintroduce Tibet into UNFCCC and COP30 discussions and to integrate it into Indo-Pacific climate and security frameworks.
- **Academic Freedom and Collaboration:**
The forum called for scholars to resist self-censorship, expand research cooperation with Tibetan experts, and develop cross-regional academic and civil-society networks.
- **Regional and Multilateral Solutions:**
Proposals included regional water-diplomacy mechanisms, coordinated think tank summits, and civil society coalitions focused on sustainable resource management and transparency.
- **Media and Public Engagement:**
Greater public outreach through podcasts, media, and educational initiatives was recommended to raise awareness and engage younger audiences.
- **Moral and Policy Leadership:**
Sweden’s tradition of “moral diplomacy” was reaffirmed as a model for principled, rights-based engagement—demonstrating that small states can play meaningful roles in defending environmental and cultural integrity.
- **Tibet is an Issue of Global Concern**
Tibet’s climate crisis is not a localized issue—it is a global ecological and moral challenge that demands coordinated international attention, grounded in scientific cooperation, human rights, and sustainable governance.

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Climate Crisis in Tibet

Venue

Sjöfartshuset, Skeppsbron 10
Stockholm, Sweden

Date

Thursday, October 16th 2025

08:20 – 08:45 hrs: Registration and Coffee

08:45 – 09:00 hrs: Inaugural Session

Welcome Remarks

Dr. Jagannath Panda, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden

Introductory Remarks

Dr. Niklas Swanström, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden

09:00 – 10:30 hrs: Session I - China as a Revisionist Power in the Himalayas and Asia

Discussion Questions: What are China's key infrastructure projects in Tibet, particularly related to damming and mining? What is the projected and actual scope and ambit of these initiatives? What are the ecological effects on wildlife and on biodiversity? What are the regional and global implications of China's infrastructure projects in Tibet and beyond? How have advancements in engineering and construction technology enabled China to undertake large-scale infrastructure projects (dams, highways, railways) in Tibet's challenging terrain? How has China used emerging technologies (e.g. AI, satellite monitoring) to implement its policies in Tibet?

Moderator: Ms. Eerishika Pankaj, Organisation for Research on China and Asia, New Delhi, India

Speakers (5-7 minutes per speaker):

- Mr. Charles Parton OBE, Former British Diplomat and Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy
- Dr. Jiayi Zhou, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Stockholm, Sweden
- Dr. Linus Zhang, Department of Water Resources Engineering, Lund University, Lund, Sweden
- Ms. Ute Wallenböck, the Department of Mongolian and Tibetan Studies, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany
- Dr. Sriparna Pathak, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India

[Release of the Special Stockholm Report titled: *Whither Tibet in the Climate Crisis Agenda?*]

10:30 – 12:00 hrs: Session II: Militarization and Infrastructure Build Up in Tibet: Climate and Ecological Fallout

Discussion Questions: What is the extent and scope of the military modernization efforts in the Tibetan Plateau? What is the ultimate cost of the upsurge in military infrastructure? To what extent are financial resources being allocated in Tibet to support military modernization efforts? What are the current and projected strategies of the CCP for consolidating control over Tibet through the PLA? What long-term environmental effects will it have on Tibet? How does the dual-use nature of China's infrastructure in Tibet (e.g., airports, railways, dams) blur the line between civilian development and military expansion?

Moderator: Mr. Björn Jerdén, Swedish National China Centre (NKK), Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), Stockholm, Sweden

Speakers (5-7 minutes per speaker):

- Dr. Niklas Swanström, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden
- Ms. Zuzana Košková, European Values Center for Security Policy, Prague, Czech Republic
- Mr. Richard Ghiasy, Leiden Asia Center, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands and Director of GeoStrat
- Dr. Dattesh D. Parulekar, Goa University, Goa, India
- Ms. Eerishika Pankaj, Organisation for Research on China and Asia, New Delhi, India
-

12:00 – 13:00 hrs: Lunch Break

13:00 – 13:20 hrs: Photo Session



13:20–14:50 hrs: Session III Population Politics: Erasure of Tibetan Culture and Identity

Discussion Questions: What are the main goals behind China's population and urbanization policies in Tibet, and how do they reflect broader state interests in national integration and territorial control? To what extent can the relocation of Tibetan villagers and the erosion of nomadic pastoral lifestyles be seen as forced assimilation rather than development or modernization? How does the reduction of Tibetan language instruction and the rise of state-run boarding schools' impact intergenerational cultural transmission and identity formation among Tibetan youth? How are the Tibetan people coping? Has there been any pushback or is there little recourse?

Moderator: Ambassador Lars Vargö, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden

Speakers (5-7 minutes per speaker):

- Dr. Tsering Topgyal, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom
- Dr. Astha Chadha, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan
- Ms. Lisa Zhang, Swedish National China Centre (NKK), Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), Stockholm, Sweden
- Mr. Rahul Karan Reddy, Organisation for Research on China and Asia, New Delhi, and the Embassy of India in Sweden
- Ms. Shruti Kapil, International Centre for Sustainability (ICfS)

14:50 – 15:30: Afternoon Fika Break

15:30 – 17:00 hrs: Session IV: Panel Discussion - Bringing Tibet to the Fore of Global Debate

Discussion Questions: *[These are suggested guiding questions, though the discussion may evolve in any direction the panel sees fit]* What common threads do you see connecting the environmental, developmental and cultural challenges facing Tibet? Which of these issues do you believe is most urgent for the international community to prioritise, and why? How might advocacy for Tibet be articulated so that it resonates with global policy agendas? How can international collaborations between governments, think tanks, and NGOs sustain momentum beyond this forum? What are some concrete next steps that should be taken?

Moderator: Dr. Jagannath Panda, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden

Speakers (3-4 minutes per speaker):

- Each previous speaker will be invited to make remarks.

Concluding Observations: Dr. Niklas Swanström, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, Sweden

17:00 hrs: End of the Event



Institute for Security and Development Policy
Västra Finnbodavägen 2, 131 30 Nacka, Sweden
www.isdp.eu | info@isdp.eu